

Service Complaints Adjudicator's Annual Report 2025/26

Introduction

1. This report and accompanying annexes set out a summary of the service complaints escalated to me as the Service Complaints Adjudicator for the Legal Ombudsman in 2025/26.
2. Having concluded 8,199 lawyer complaints in 2025/26, the Legal Ombudsman received 340 complaints about their own customer service. This represents a customer service complaint being raised in approximately 4% of cases. Most service complaints were resolved at Stage 1 of the service complaints process, with 55 complaints being escalated to Stage 2, and 16 complaints being escalated to me at Stage 3.
3. My observations and recommendations made in those 16 complaints are included in the annexed reports provided to the OLC Board in October 2025 and March 2026. This annual report provides a summary of my observations on complaint themes; areas for improvement; and general observations on the Legal Ombudsman's Service Complaint process.

Complaint themes

4. Of the 16 complaints I have considered at Stage 3, 15 were from users of legal services, and one was raised by a service provider.
5. Whilst relatively small numbers of complaint have been escalated to me during this time, I have noted themes of customer concern as: delays during an investigation; unhappiness with aspects of a staff member's communication; and whether reasonable adjustments are being accommodated. Other customer concerns I have considered have included: wait times; how linked investigations are co-ordinated; and the substance and timeliness of the service complaint investigation itself.

Areas for service improvement

6. In 15 of the 16 complaints I have considered, the outcome of my review was consistent with the findings made by the Legal Ombudsman in their Stage 2 response. In the one instance where I concluded a different outcome, this was due to an imbalance of approach in communication between the parties of the lawyer complaint, which had not previously been upheld. I found the service provider who had raised this service complaint had not been kept reasonably updated and there had been delay in responding to their requests.

7. Where my findings have been consistent with the Legal Ombudsman's own findings, I have also made recommendations for remedial action and future improvement on four complaints.
8. In two cases the recommendations were specific remedial action for those customers. This included an apology for a customer who had received inaccurate information on the likely wait time for an investigation; and considering whether a customer's questions that had gone unanswered could be answered retrospectively.
9. In the other two cases, my recommendations included consideration of service improvements that would have a wider benefit to other customers.
10. In the first, I highlighted the importance of having oversight of investigations taking longer than usual, recommending that the previously used process of reviewing 'aged' cases was revisited. Alternatively, I suggested that a more proportionate approach of oversight might be introduced to ensure cases reaching a certain age were reviewed systemically.
11. The second wider service improvement recommended relates to the Legal Ombudsman's record keeping of customer contact records. Individual remedial action was required to ensure duplicate records were resolved for the customer concerned. However, wider learning was recommended to consider whether proportionate management intervention was needed to avoid similar instances in future, and whether the Legal Ombudsman needed to improve staff knowledge on the importance of accuracy in these records, particularly in regard to recording customer reasonable adjustment needs.

Overall impression

12. In my first year as the adjudicator, I have found the standard of consideration of complaints by the Service Complaints team to be excellent. I have seen the positive impact of recent changes to the service complaints process, by way of improved timeliness in the handling of customer complaints, and I am confident that my recommendations for future improvement will be implemented.

Sally Berlin

Service Complaints Adjudicator

April 2026

Annex 1

Service Complaints Adjudicator's board report, October 2025

1. This provides a summary of the Stage 3 service complaints that I have considered and responded to from April to September 2025.
2. Over this period, I have made decisions on nine stage 3 complaints. Eight complaints were brought by users of legal services and one by a service provider.
3. My view, so far, is that the standard of consideration of complaints by the Service Complaints team is excellent. I have already started to see the positive impact of the recent changes to the service complaint process, through improved timeliness of stage 2 decisions.
4. There is only one of the complaints, in this period, where the outcome of stage 3 varied, partially, to that at stage 2. This related to the service complaint made by a service provider. I felt that, in limited respects, there had been an inappropriate imbalance of approach in communication to the parties during the investigation of the lawyer complaint. This related to: (i) core information about expected timelines and (ii) an unreasonable delay in responding to the service provider's request for a hard copy bundle of the evidence and then, a failure to provide a revised date for the service provider to respond to the Case Decision in the context of the hard copy bundle having been provided.
5. The small number of cases coming to me, so far, make it impossible to draw any safe themes. For completeness, however, complaints that have made their way to me at stage 3 have included topics such as:
 - Delay in investigation (that is, the investigation being too slow). Only one complaint alleged that the wait time to allocation of an investigator was too long. Two were partially upheld (limited periods of time where progress should reasonably have been quicker).
 - Unhappiness with an aspect (or more than one aspect) of the investigator's communication with the individual. Only one of these was partially upheld and that is the service provider service complaint, which I have already summarised above.
 - Just one related directly to reasonable adjustments, that was not upheld.
 - Communication during the service complaint process. None were upheld.
 - Service complaint delay. One was not upheld. One was upheld (at stage 2) for historical reasons.

6. In this period, I made one recommendation that if the ‘aged’ case review process (by which an ombudsman would review and intervene in investigations over a specific age) has not been revisited in the last 12 months (at 13 June 2025), that it is revisited with a view to considering whether a proportionate variation of it, or another less resource-intensive process, could be justified to check on, and aid, progress of cases of a certain age (with a view to that age bar gradually being reduced over time).

Sally Berlin

Service Complaints Adjudicator

October 2025

Annex 2

Service Complaints Adjudicator's board report, March 2026

1. This provides a summary of the Stage 3 service complaints that I have considered and responded to from October 2025 to March 2026.
2. Over this period, I have made decisions on seven stage 3 complaints. All were brought by users of legal services.
3. My view remains that the standard of consideration of complaints by the Service Complaints team is excellent.
4. None of the outcomes of my stage 3 reviews varied the findings of stage 2, in terms of whether the complaint was upheld, partially upheld or not, nor differed in the compensation offered.
5. The complaints that have made their way to me at stage 3 in this period have included topics such as:
 - Wait time to allocation. Just one complaint raised this and was not upheld. In the same case, however, I did make a recommendation about the communication relating to the wait time, set out below.
 - Delay in investigation (that is, the investigation being too slow). Two cases upheld this complaint, one did not.
 - Unhappiness with an aspect (or more than one aspect) of the investigator's communication with the individual. Two cases upheld this complaint (significantly, one included issues with the tone of the investigator's communication), one did not.
 - One complaint (upheld) involved issues around the co-ordination of multiple lawyer complaints. A related recommendation is included below.
 - Two related directly to reasonable adjustments, one upheld and one partially upheld.
 - Communication during the service complaint process, just one complaint, not upheld.
 - Service complaint substance, two complaints, not upheld.
6. In this period, I have made a small number of recommendations:

Case 1, I recommended that:

 - (i) If it had not already, LeO investigate how a problem around splitting and then recombining a lawyer complaint came to arise in the first place

and whether any proportionate management action was appropriate to prevent it recurring.

(ii) LeO check whether there is more than one customer contact record in LeO's case management system for the customer. If there is, LeO should resolve that so that there is one complete customer contact record for the customer.

(iii) LeO should carry out a proportionate review of its employees' understanding of how the customer contact record in its case management system works, especially in the context of reasonable adjustments. Having done that, if appropriate, LeO should provide further training and check for duplicate customer contact records for other customers.

Case 2: A complaint about delay to initial assessment was not upheld, but I noticed that in the final few weeks of waiting, the communication to the customer should have been more accurate. I thought that the appropriate remedy for this was an apology.

Case 3: An upheld complaint related to the fact that the investigator of the lawyer complaint had not answered a number of questions during the investigation. This continued to prey on the customers' minds, leaving doubt about whether all the relevant evidence had been considered. I recommended that, beyond acknowledging that this had happened, LeO should consider whether this could still be appropriately remedied with a clear answer to the questions that the customers considered to remain outstanding. That may help them to reach a sense of closure, at least in part.

Sally Berlin

Service Complaints Adjudicator

31 March 2026